DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 441 CS 509 977

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TITLE	Using Language To Create Community: An Ethnographic Study.
PUB DATE	1998-11-00
NOTE	19p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Freshmen; *Educational Environment; Ethnography; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Language Role; *Living Learning Centers; Participant Observation; Seminars; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	*Learning Communities; *University of Vermont

ABSTRACT

A study examined first-year students' out-of-class lives, focusing on the "potentially rich" environment created when students who are enrolled in a first-year seminar also live together. The students observed were members of the University of Vermont's Living and Learning Center. Both the living environment and the class were designed with community in mind. "The Ecology, Geology, and History of the Lake Champlain Basin" course was year-long, taught by three teachers from the disciplines represented by the course title, writing-intensive, and structured around field activities and collaborative projects. The participant/observer attended the class, went on field trips, and interviewed six students in a male suite and five students in a female suite every Friday afternoon throughout the fall and spring semesters. Both the male and female suites formed a community. However, the females did not get on as well together personally as the males did. Transcriptions of their conversations illustrate this. This research project has shown that just putting students together does not guarantee that they will form a learning community. In fact, for competitive students, assigning collaborative projects seems to increase tensions. The discovery that teachers have less control over how students "read" their classes was unexpected. To be pursued further is how the observer's questioning called forth some of the language of community building. (NKA)

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ED 426 441

Using Language to Create Community: An Ethnographic Study.

by Jean Kiedaisch

Published:

1998-11

CS 509 477

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Using Language to Create Community: An Ethnographic Study

In their studies of human development, both William Perry (1970) and Mary Belenky et al (1986) cite the importance of extended peer interactions in facilitating growth, with Perry in fact claiming that it is in the dorms that a student's epistemological assumptions are most challenged. However, when we compositionists study our students as do Robert Connors and Lad Tobin in recent articles about their male first-year students or as does Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater in Academic Literacies, we usually concentrate on their in-class lives.

Because of my work with a first-year program at the University of Vermont, I became interested in students' out-of-class lives, specifically in the potentially rich environment created when students who are enrolled in a first-year seminar also live together. I wondered how living together might help students form learning communities, how they might connect, or interweave, their in-class and out-of-class lives, and if I could observe how they used language to create this community.

I therefore became a participant/observer in fall 1996 in a first-year seminar in which students shared suites in our university's Living and Learning Center. In the suites, students live in a single or double room and share a living room and two bathrooms, all in a cluster of buildings that contain classrooms, faculty offices, dining

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facilities, pottery and photography studios, and the academic resource office which includes our writing center. Certainly the physical space was designed to promote community (so much so that students who choose not to live there say it's because residents never leave).

The class too was designed with community in mind. "The Ecology, Geology, and History of the Lake Champlain Basin" was year-long, taught by three teachers from the disciplines named in the course title, writing-intensive, structured around field activities and collaborative projects. In addition to attending the class and going on the weekend field trips, I interviewed the six students in a male suite and the five students in a female suite every Friday afternoon throughout the fall semester and on into the spring. I was surprised by what I discovered: the males did indeed use language to form a learning community, interweaving their in-class and out-of-class lives, while the females did not. However, gender differences do not seem to be the explanation--more on that later.

I met all of these students at Orientation the previous June, enrolling them in EcoGeo and helping them plan the rest of their schedules. All, males and females, struck me as serious students signing up for this class because it sounded intriguing and challenging, and all were looking for other challenging classes as well. As a

group, then, they could be characterized as motivated to do well academically.

In September, we began our interviews. The eleven students (out of a class of twenty-two) were curious about my project and eager to gather for our Friday afternoon conversations. When, for example, someone from across the hall wandered in with another activity to suggest, they usually said they were busy. The students, males and females, devoted a lot of energy to choosing whether to go by their real names or invent pseudonyms. They reached different conclusions, so the names I use are a mixture of real and invented.

The males and females were very different when it came to their sense of being prepared for the class. The males seemed confident, naming courses such as environmental science and AP bio that they'd taken in high school. One said, "I feel confident the teachers will help." The females, on the other hand, seemed a bit concerned:

Donna: I don't feel that I have the knowledge, like geology.

Karen: I have appreciation for the outdoors--but not this area.

Eliza: I'm not so prepared though I have great interest....

Donna: I'm unfamiliar with computers.

Karen: I'm semi-familiar, getting a computer soon.

Margaret: So-so....

Jill: I didn't have earth science [in high school], but I did a summer geology course. I'm not real familiar, but I can get around on computers.

All students, males and females, seemed happy with their choice of the Living and Learning Center. When asked about this choice in an early interview, the males said:

Lane: I liked the whole idea of the Living and Learning Center.

Jeremy: Other people are like wow! I wish I could be someplace like this.

Chapin: We're kinda here, come and go, take breaks to get food, do things together.

All the males except one said that most of their friends lived in the Center and all except this same student wanted to stay in Living and Learning for a second year (even though most UVM sophomores live on another part of campus).

Initially, the females too were enthusiastic about their choice to live in the Center, and for some pretty specific reasons:

Eliza: I like Living and Learning a lot better [than other residence halls]. You get to know know more people.

Donna: I like having five roommates. [A peer mentor lived with them as well.]

Karen: There's a big social group in the column.

Eliza: It's a better environment, or a <u>good</u> environment.

Donna: A step up from dorm life. There's more room.

Karen: More independence. There's a common room to keep clean, like an apartment, and you have a balcony. . . .

Eliza: It was comforting to know roommates had similar interests.

Karen: I knew I'd get roommates who like the outdoors.

As for the kind of relationship between their in-class and out-of-class lives they expected to have, the males commented:

Chapin: You know, if you're having a problem with a teacher or an assignment, you're talking as friends, not just classmates.

Jeremy: I just think it's easier to learn. . .

Bill: It's good to have people in the suite who have knowledge, maybe can help you out.

The males obviously didn't change their minds as the semester went on, for in the spring semester, some of them were taking as many as three of their five classes together, including EcoGeo. The males sat together in

class and asked to do group projects together; members of this suite volunteered to help load canoes the day before an all-day fieldtrip and on a trip to Ethan Allen Homestead volunteered to work together at an event Halloween night.

Members of the female suite, on the other hand, seemed ambivalent from the beginning about combining living and learning, as was evident when I asked what kind of relationship they were looking for between the class and their suite:

> **Eliza**: I'd like to keep them separate in a way. I definitely want to talk about class, but I want to have free time too.
>
> **Donna**: With EcoGeo, it's harder to keep them separate because of all the fieldtrips....
>
> **Karen**: I'd like to be able to talk about things, but I don't think our only conversation is EcoGeo.
>
> **Jill**: I don't want to live just discussing [academic] stuff.

Throughout the semester the females expressed a need to keep academics out of their living environment, a need the males seemed not to have. The females did not choose to take other classes together second semester, only two chose to stay in EcoGeo, and only one chose to stay in Living and Learning a second year.

The males seemed to find it quite easy to live together harmoniously. As the semester went on, they spent enormous amounts of time together talking and playing computer games. Obviously, the shared living room (more intimate than the lounge area of a conventional residence hall) promoted this practice. When I asked them how they achieved this harmony, DT responded:

> **DT**: You have to respect each other's privacy; listen to each other; don't go after each other to say what's wrong. You have to share belongings--more like a family. You can't be like "this is mine."

The males had no rules about who would do what chores; when they found that Lane wasn't good at keeping a bathroom clean, they gave him one of the two as his very own.

The females did have lists of who would do what chores but it didn't seem to help them live together in harmony. When asked privately if they were getting along:

> **Eliza**: Not really. I think we all have different ways of living. . . . We don't fit together that well.
>
> **Donna**: I think there's moments when we come together, but there's always a little tension between us. I kinda like not being that close. We don't really work together on papers. On the first paper, we got into a problem with the graphs. [What happened?] My

interpretation? Karen is a very competitive person. We waited for her to come home from rugby. She didn't want our graphs.

When asked at the end of the semester about living together, the females seemed to have decided the experience had not been worthwhile:

Margaret: I liked common interests, but if I had to do it again, cuz like you never get away from it.

Karen: Yeah, during the projects I wish I didn't live here at all. It's really competitive. I think the people who live here, like any bad vibes from the first project

Margaret: Like it's just an ongoing tension.

In looking at why the males may have been successful in living together, I found much evidence that they were tolerant of difference, while at the same time developing a kind of group norm (for example, if Lane had to have his own bathroom, certainly the rest of the group was communicating that clean bathrooms are the norm). Likewise, although DT got sidetracked from academics early on and did very poorly first semester, the other members of the suite kept working to get him up for classes. As one said, "If he goes, the TV goes." (A footnote: a student with a learning disability, DT may have decided to avoid being compared to the other students by making it clear that he wasn't trying.)

When the males talked about each other, I didn't hear them being judgmental or unkind. For example, when I noted that Chapin always spoke first when I asked them a question, Jeremy replied, with a big smile, "Yeah, whether he knows the answer or not." Chapin, for his part, said about Lane (who was often out juggling in the park as he was for this particular interview), "He's odd, but we like him." They all gleefully explained that Brandon, now that he'd decided to be a philosophy major, went downtown to a coffeehouse every night.

The females talked a lot about difference, as they did above, but never with any sense of appreciation for other lifestyles or worldviews. For example, when Eliza described two of the women in her suite (the top two students in the class) as "into their work," "scheduled," and "competitive" and mentioned that they got up early to run every day, these characteristics were all in contrast to her own preferences and were part of an explanation of why the group didn't get along.

The two suites used language to create their shared vision of the class, the males creating a class that was fun and stimulating, a real opportunity:

Chapin: It's an appealing class overall--boats, hiking, flying. It's a good break.

Jeremy: Having three specialists know in-depth their professions.

Chapin: You can tell they're interested. My calc teacher doesn't teach with any vim and vigor.

As the fall semester went on, this view of the class was reinforced and solidified.

On the other hand, the females' vision of the same class was a negative one, focusing on class time not well used, too much work, team-teachers who didn't work together well, writing tutors who weren't helpful, too many out-of-class demands on their time. For example, when I asked about an upcoming science paper, Eliza said,

Eliza: It's ruining the weekend. Wednesday was when we had all the information. So now I can't go out Friday or Saturday and next Friday I can't go out because we leave at 8:00 [Saturday, for a weekend camping trip].

A camping trip was to her not worth staying in Friday night. Jill said,

Jill: I'm really pissed with this class because it's just too much work.

Karen decided the class was too much like another science class she was taking, Donna began to focus on small disagreements between two of the teachers. The females became more displeased with the class as the semester went on, and for a few, their displeasure (or guilt because they couldn't tell me what they thought I wanted to hear)

began to translate into their missing Friday afternoon interviews.

As mentioned earlier, EcoGeo was structured around collaborative assignments. Both suites initially wanted to work together as a group rather than split up, but the two seemed to approach these tasks very differently. In talking about an early data-gathering fieldtrip, the males said,

> **Jeremy**: Had a pretty good time Wednesday [at the Winooski River]. Our group is great doing data collection. [Others add "great," "best group"]
>
> **Brandon**: We got finished first and did more measurements than anyone else.

At the next such trip, I observed that again this group finished first, then went a little upriver to skip stones, while the females were slower and more methodical. In fact, they repeated one set of measurements because they weren't confident they had done them carefully enough.

While the males competed as a group against other groups, I never observed their competing with one another in the suites outside of in the endless games (computer and otherwise) they played. For example, they seemed to avoid mentioning grades. They'd say "I did better than I expected" or "not as well as I expected" without saying just how well that was.

The female group did not compete with other groups in the field; back home in the suites, however, they seemed to break down into roommate pairs and to not want to work with each other. As the due date for the science paper approached, the groups were asked to share their data though you were only to get another's data if you in turn had some t offer). These instructions to share created great tension in the female suite, while the males set about planning an all-nighter:

Brandon: We planned on it. We made a trip to the P&C around 12:30.

Jeremy: Seven to seven [to do the paper].

When asked how they felt about working together, they responded:

Chapin: It's good to have the support of roommates.

Jeremy: The more input, the more views the better--a much broader view of the subject.

One afternoon when only Eliza and Margaret were present, I asked them about their work on the science paper:

Eliza: [It took] all night two nights.

Margaret: All weekend.

Eliza: I didn't really leave L/L for like three days.

Me: Was it a group effort or individual?

Eliza: By that weekend, individual.

Me: Do you feel a sense of community centered around

the class?

Eliza: Maybe there's a sense of it, but not a strong sense. I mean, yeah, we're in the same class. I know I can ask anybody questions if I want to, but we haven't bonded that much.

Margaret: I think part of it's because we're so busy with different things that we have to get done.

Me: Do you wish there were more bonding or is it fine the way it is?

Eliza: It's ok. We're just different people. Yeah, it's fine.

Me: Do you feel as if you got what you wanted from living in L/L?

Eliza: I think I'd like it if we all were really close. I mean we are in a way but

Me: Do you sense it's any different with the guys' suite?

Eliza: Yes. They hang out a lot together. I'm really close to Donna, my own roommate.

Margaret: Same with Karen [her roommate].

Eliza: With our roommates, not a whole suite together. I think the boys' suite are much more unified.

Me: Do you go out on weekends?

Eliza: Not together.

The males saw what was happening in the female suite

and commented:

Brandon: That's just the way girls are, concerned with comparing to each other, like competitive.

Chapin: Girls are a lot harder on other girls than guys are....

D.T.: It's personalities. I only know Donna and Eliza. The rest just seem to keep to themselves, like their doors are closed. Some are a lot more strict, like about the rules.

I tend to agree with DT that "It's personalities." The female suite for a similar class I taught the previous year ("A River Runs Through It") was not competitive. Again, probably the two most talented students in the course lived there. They wanted to do well, but were willing to share what they knew. It was clear they had formed a learning community, lived together harmoniously, enjoyed the class, and did well. Remembering this suite made me realize gender was not the easy explanation it might at first have seemed.

The male suite for the Rivers class also formed a community. But they were an interesting example of how, without an academic focus, what tends to be created is a community of trouble-makers. They broke every rule in Residential Life's book; they ostracized the females who wanted to do well (but then went to them for help at semester's end). In a week-long canoe trip at the end of

the year, they took on British accents and invented elaborate games involving sword fights, which set their group apart from teachers, guides, female students. This suite too had one member who did no work whatsoever, in this case because of a devastating family situation. (I found the two male students to be interesting examples of how, for students who really aren't ready to work, peer support is not enough to bring them along.) The other males from the Rivers suite have matured, have found majors that are focusing their energy, are close friends all living together off-campus.

What can I conclude from what I have studied? My school, like many others, has in recent years been focusing intently on the first-year experience of students with a particular interest in retention and also in response to faculty complaints that the residence halls are anti-intellectual. I'd been arguing for having students who are taking a first-year seminar together also live together. This research has shown me that just putting students together doesn't guarantee they will form a learning community. In fact, for highly competitive students, it doesn't even encourage forming such a community--and assigning collaborative projects seems to increase tensions. In helping me puzzle over my results, Jeremy offered "We lucked out" and Bill said, "Our suite just bonded and I don't know why."

Even more disconcerting than the fact that just putting students together is not enough is my discovery that we as teachers have less control over how students "read" our classes than I had always assumed. A great deal of social construction of classes goes on as students converse and it was interesting, having attended the class, to see how two opposite readings were both "true."

What I didn't investigate through my interviews is the theories of knowledge that underlie the thinking and behavior in the two suites. It certainly would seem that the more competitive members of the female suite thought of knowledge as a commodity in short supply--the way to be on top in the class was to protect the knowledge they had, not "give it away." But were the males any different? Jeremy once explained to me that one of DT's problems was that he helped people out by "giving them ideas" and then he didn't have any left for his own papers. Likewise, when the males told me they'd signed up for classes together and I remarked "Lots of opportunities for collaboration," they laughed--most likely what I'd call collaboration, they'd call "giving each other the answer."

I would like to pursue some of these avenues further. I'm also curious as to how my questioning called forth some of the language of community-building. Perhaps follow-up interviews with the eleven students could help us reconstruct my role and its importance or non-

importance. This might bring me back to the question of how teachers can help students use language to create community, both within and outside the classroom.